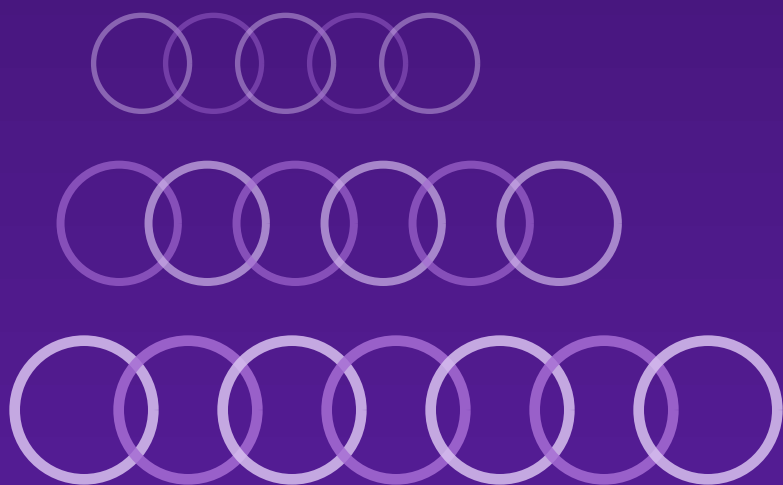


RESIST. REVOLT.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR ORGANIZING DIRECT ACTION

Civil Disobedience

When the law protects profit over people,
disciplined, nonviolent refusal is how ordinary
people force the question into the open.



Strategy · Roles · Safety plan · Know your rights · Day-of steps · Jail support

01 What Civil Disobedience Is

Civil disobedience is the open, deliberate, nonviolent breaking of a law or rule to expose an injustice and pressure those in power to change it. Participants act publicly and accept the possibility of arrest as part of the message.

It is not chaos. It is one of the most disciplined forms of collective action there is. Its power comes from contrast: ordinary people, calm and organized, willing to risk something, set against a system that must use force to defend an injustice everyone can now see.

A tradition built by working people

- **Abolitionists** who refused to obey fugitive slave laws.
- **Suffragists** who picketed, were jailed, and kept going.
- **Sit-down strikers** in Flint, Michigan (1936–37), who occupied the plants and won recognition of the autoworkers' union.
- **Students at the Greensboro lunch counters** (1960) and the Freedom Riders, whose disciplined nonviolence broke Jim Crow's legitimacy.
- **ACT UP**, farmworkers, tenants, and climate defenders who used direct action to force action that polite requests never won.

Read through a class lens

The law is not neutral. It is written and enforced largely in the interests of those who own property and capital. Evictions, union busting, and the destruction of communities are often perfectly legal. Civil disobedience refuses to let legality stand in for justice. It shows that the order capital depends on rests on our cooperation, and that cooperation can be withdrawn.

“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL (1963)

Written from a jail cell after an act of civil disobedience.

02 Is This the Right Tactic?

Civil disobedience is an escalation, not a starting point. It works best when the public has already seen you try every reasonable channel, and the target has refused.

Petitions & meetings

Public testimony

Rallies & marches

Pickets & boycotts

Strikes & walkouts

Civil disobedience

ESCALATION LADDER: EACH RUNG RAISES THE COST TO THE TARGET

Ask before you act

- **What is the demand?** Specific and winnable, aimed at a named decision-maker.
- **What does the action dramatize?** The best actions make the injustice visible: blocking the eviction, sitting in at the office that refuses to meet, occupying the closed clinic.
- **Who will it move?** The target, the public, and potential members. Use your power map.
- **Do we have the base?** Strong actions are backed by many supporters, not a lone few.
- **What comes next?** Plan the follow-up before the first arrest.

Our nonviolence agreement

Every participant, arrestable or not, commits to these in advance. They protect people, keep the focus on the injustice, and deny opponents an excuse.

- We will be open about who we are and what we are doing.
- We will not use physical or verbal violence toward anyone, including police and opponents.
- We will not damage property, carry weapons, or bring drugs or alcohol.
- We will follow the decisions of the action team and our affinity group.
- We will protect each other, and especially the most vulnerable among us.

03 Every Action Needs a Team

Only some people risk arrest. Many more make it possible. A strong action has more support people than arrestees.

1 Action lead

Holds the plan and the timeline, makes real-time calls with the tactical team.

2 Arrestables

Trained participants who have chosen to risk arrest and carry out the core action.

3 Marshals

Guide the crowd, keep routes clear, watch for danger, and help de-escalate.

4 Police liaison

One designated person who speaks with police. Everyone else stays focused on the action.

5 Legal observers

Independent observers (often from a National Lawyers Guild chapter) who document police conduct.

6 Jail support

Track every arrestee, staff the phones, meet people at release with food and rides.

7 Medics

Trained street medics or first-aiders with water, supplies, and a heat plan.

8 Media & storytellers

Speak to press, livestream, and capture stories (see the Story Capture guide).

9 Wellness & aftercare

Check in with people during and after; connect them to support.

Affinity groups

Organize participants into **affinity groups** of 5 to 15 people who train together, know each other's needs and risk levels, and make decisions together. Each group should have arrestables and at least one support person who will not risk arrest and holds everyone's emergency info.

04 Steps to Organize the Action

1

6+ weeks out: set strategy

Confirm the demand, target, and why this tactic fits now. Form a small action team. Decide what the action will be and what success looks like.

2

5 weeks: secure legal support

Connect with a lawyer or your local National Lawyers Guild chapter. Learn the likely charges, penalties, and local arrest process. Line up legal observers.

3

4 weeks: scout the site

Visit the location at the same day and time. Note entrances, exits, sightlines, shade, restrooms, nearest hospital, and where supporters can stand legally.

4

3 weeks: recruit and train

Hold nonviolence and know-your-rights trainings. Run role-plays of arrest and de-escalation. Every participant decides their own risk level freely, without pressure.

5

2 weeks: build support

Staff jail support, medics, and marshals. Prepare the communications plan, press release, and spokespeople. Set up a support fund for bail and fines.

6

1 week: finalize

Walk through the run of show. Confirm roles, affinity groups, contact sheets, and the legal hotline. Hold a final briefing; share sensitive details only with those who need them.

7

Action day

Gather early, brief everyone, carry out the plan, and stay disciplined. Leave together, and keep a headcount.

8

After: support and follow up

Meet every arrestee on release. Debrief within 72 hours. Handle court dates together. Announce the next escalation.

05 The Safety Plan

Write it down, share it with every role, and rehearse it. A safety plan is how a movement shows its people that they are worth protecting.

Physical safety

- Medics on site with water, electrolytes, first-aid supplies, and a heat or cold plan.
- Know the nearest hospital and an evacuation route.
- Participants bring needed medications in original, labeled containers.
- Plan for shade, restrooms, food, and accessibility for disabled participants.
- Use the buddy system: no one is ever alone.

De-escalation

- Marshals and the police liaison are trained to stay calm and keep space between groups.
- Ignore hecklers and counter-protesters; do not engage.
- Agree on calm signals for sitting down, holding, and dispersing.
- If tension spikes, the action lead can pause or end the action.
- Never physically resist arrest; go limp only if trained and you understand the possible extra charges.

Risk tiers

- Ask everyone to choose a level: support only, legal presence, or arrestable.
- Some people face far higher stakes from arrest: noncitizens, people on probation or parole, people with certain jobs or licenses, caregivers, and people with health needs.
- Encourage anyone at higher risk to consult a lawyer before deciding, and to take a vital support role instead.
- Never pressure anyone into risk.

Digital & information security

- Share sensitive plans only with people who need them, using encrypted messaging.
- Use a passcode on phones and turn off face or fingerprint unlock before the action.
- Arrestables can carry a minimal phone or none at all.
- Avoid posting faces of participants who haven't agreed to be shown.
- Have every arrestee write the legal hotline number on their arm in permanent marker.

Emergency protocol

If anyone is injured or police order a dispersal: **marshals call it, medics respond, legal observers document, and groups leave together by the planned route to the regroup point.** Jail support starts the headcount immediately.

06 Know Your Rights & Arrest

Laws differ by state and country. This page is general information, not legal advice. Get a know-your-rights training from local lawyers before any action.

If you are stopped or arrested (U.S.)

- **Stay calm and keep your hands visible.** Don't run, argue, or physically resist, even if you believe the arrest is unjust.
- **You have the right to remain silent.** Say clearly: "I am going to remain silent. I want to speak to a lawyer." Then stop talking about the action.
- **You don't have to consent to a search.** Say: "I do not consent to a search." Don't physically block one.
- **Identification rules vary.** Some states require you to give your name when lawfully detained. Learn your local rule in training.
- **Don't sign anything** or make statements without a lawyer.
- **Don't talk about the action** in the police car or in a cell; assume conversations may be recorded.
- **Noncitizens:** do not answer questions about immigration status or birthplace, and don't sign immigration papers without a lawyer.

What to carry

Bring

- ID (if your plan calls for it)
- Legal hotline number on your arm
- Medications in labeled bottles
- Water and a small snack
- Cash for transit; weather-appropriate layers

Leave at home

- Weapons or anything that could be seen as one
- Drugs or alcohol
- Address books and sensitive papers
- Jewelry and valuables
- An unlocked, biometric-enabled phone

07 Action Day & After

T – 2 hrs

Gather at a staging site. Sign-in, headcount, role check, final legal briefing.

T – 1 hr

Affinity groups confirm buddies and emergency contacts with jail support.

T – 15 min

Move to the site. Marshals in place, legal observers and medics visible.

T = 0

Action begins. Spokespeople and media team go live with the demand.

Action

Hold with discipline. Supporters chant, sing, and witness from legal space.

Arrests

Arrestables comply calmly. Jail support logs every name, time, and transport.

Close

Remaining participants leave together by plan. Regroup and do a headcount.

Jail support

- Track every arrestee: name, time, location, and where they were taken. Share the list with the legal team.
- Call precincts and courts to follow each person through processing.
- Meet people at release with water, food, a phone charger, rides, and a warm welcome. No one walks out alone.
- Manage the bail and fines fund, and help people keep track of court dates.

Debrief and aftercare

- Hold a debrief within 72 hours: what worked, what didn't, what we learned about the target.
- Check in on people's wellbeing. Arrest and confrontation can be hard; offer peer support and connect people to care.
- Show up together at every court date. Solidarity doesn't end at release.
- Tell the story, and announce the next step. An action without a follow-up lets the target off the hook.

08 Action Plan Worksheet

DEMAND

DATE / TIME

ACTION LEAD

LEGAL SUPPORT / HOTLINE

MEDIC LEAD

REGROUP POINT

TARGET (DECISION-MAKER)

LOCATION

POLICE LIAISON

JAIL SUPPORT LEAD

NEAREST HOSPITAL

DISPERSAL ROUTE

Personal arrest-readiness card

Each arrestable fills this out and gives it to their affinity group's support person. Keep it confidential.

NAME

AFFINITY GROUP

EMERGENCY CONTACT

PHONE

MEDICATIONS & DOSAGE TIMES

ALLERGIES / MEDICAL NEEDS

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW IF I'M HELD (KIDS, PETS, WORK)

LAWYER, IF I HAVE ONE

I HAVE

☐

Taken nonviolence training

☐

Taken know-your-rights training

☐

Talked to a lawyer about my risks

☐

Written the hotline on my arm

Their order depends on our obedience.

Withdraw it together, with discipline and care, and the whole machine has to answer. Protect each other. Leave no one behind. Come back stronger.

RESIST. REVOLT.

Important & further reading

This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws and penalties vary by place. Before any action, consult a lawyer or your local National Lawyers Guild chapter (nlg.org), and get in-person nonviolence, know-your-rights, and street-medic training.

ACLU, "Know Your Rights: Protesters' Rights." aclu.org

Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963).

Companion guides: *Power Mapping* and *Story Capture* (Resist. Revolt.)